

# Foundations of politics



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **Foundations of Politics Sarah Quicke**

### **How many faces of power do Political scientists need to take into account when carrying out their research?**

In this essay I will show that there are three faces of power which political scientists need to take into account when carrying out their research. The first face of power is the classical pluralist view of power, presented by Dahl, the second 'decision making' face of power by neo-elitists Bachrach and Baratz, and the third face, the 'radical view of power' by Steven Lukes. The second and third faces of power can be argued to be building upon the faces of power before them. Each face of power gets progressively more complex, and harder to measure and quantify. Therefore, political scientists need to take into account all three faces of power, but bearing in mind that the first face of power is often considered too simplistic, and the third face of power is hard to measure.

A common description of power, is how one person, or group of people, 'affect' others, meaning they have influence over the others. However, Morriss argues that "power is not concerned at all with affecting, though 'influence' is. 'Power' is concerned with effecting, which is a very different idea." (Morriss, 1987: p. 29). If A has an affect on B, it alters B. If A effects B, it is the cause of the alteration to B. Therefore political scientists need to make as clear a distinction as possible between power and influence, and thus an 'effect' or 'affect', because there are subtle, but nonetheless, important differences. The faces of power debate, starts with the first face of power, sometimes called the 'decision making' phase by Robert Dahl. "Thus, for Dahl [power is when]...A has power over B to the extent that she can 'get B to do something that B wouldn't otherwise do...where there is an

<https://assignbuster.com/foundations-of-politics/>

overt conflict of interests.” (Hay, 2002: p. 172). Essentially, this is about A’s power to change the decision of B. The conflict of interests mentioned here is an important point underlying this theory. Dahl assumes that B has perfect knowledge that her changed behaviour is against her own interests. In other words, B does not want to change her behaviour and knows it is not good for her, but there is more of an incentive to act as A wishes. This idea of power can be likened to “ physical or mechanical power, in that it implies that power involves being ‘ pulled’ or pushed’ against one’s will” (Haywood, 1994: p. 126). Therefore in the example mentioned above, B’s lack of power is matched by A’s power. As in the subject of physics, where there is a force acting in one direction, there is a counter force acting in the opposing direction. As Colin Hay says: “ power is unproductive or zero sum -some gain only to the extent that others lose out.” (Hay, 2002: p. 173) This can be more clearly understood by the following example:

If a brother and a sister are arguing over which programme to watch on television, and unless the sister agrees to let the brother watch what he wants, the brother will take away the remote control. Therefore, it can be argued that the brother is exerting power over the sister. If, however, the sister did not know that her favourite programme was on today, and therefore did not want to watch the television, then the brother would not have to exert any form of power over his sister because there is no conflict of interests (Hay, 2002: p 173)

This type of power, although simplistic, is still important for political scientists, as it is overt and it is easy to detect as the actors involved can readily be identified. Robert Dahl found an example of this form of power in a <https://assignbuster.com/foundations-of-politics/>

study carried on in New Haven, Connecticut in the USA, which is described in his work, ' Who Governs?' (1963). In this study, Dahl found “ a wide disparity between the influence exerted by the politically privileged and economically powerful...[in contrast with] ordinary citizens.” (Haywood, 1994: p. 125). This face of power has faced much criticism, because only deals with the decision-making, after the agenda has been set. As in the case of New Haven, the distribution of power is not as clear-cut as Dahl has suggested. Dahl found significant differences in the amount of power two groups of society had, however, the scope of the power each group has may only be very small. In an article published in response to Dahl's findings, G. William Domhoff says: “ Dahl emphasized that there were indeed inequalities in New Haven. However, they were “ dispersed inequalities,” (Dahl, 1961, pp. 91-93) meaning that no one group had all of the different types of resources.”(Google scholar, 2005) For example, the economically powerful Dahl mentions in his study, may only have influence over business related policies, and therefore little or no influence over other policies and resources. This means in the context of the state, it is about what the government do, for example, changes in taxation, interest rates, and the introduction of new laws.

At a basic level the second face of power is concerned with how groups in society have influence over the agenda for the decision-making. These groups have an indirect but nonetheless, important role in the final decision made. Bachrach and Baratz have said power can be utilised when “ A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values... that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only

those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A” (Google scholar), 1994, p: 948). This is an important point for political scientists to take into account, because it makes significant progress from Dahl’s behavioural relationship in the first face of power. In this case, groups such as businesses, aristocracy and the very wealthy, say for example in a small community, may have power to prevent certain decisions from being discussed at all, because they have influenced the agenda. For example, if a business were dumping waste materials in a nearby river, it would be against their interests if stopping water pollution were added to the agenda. Therefore, the business may suggest other topics to add to the agenda or persuade others not to add to this to the agenda. This also leads on to the point that Andrew Haywood makes about how the ‘ form’ of power has changed in the second face. Haywood argues that Dahl’s one-dimensional view of power “ ignores the extent to which power is a possession, reflected perhaps in wealth, political position, social status and so forth” (Haywood, 1994: p. 126). By possession it is implied that power is already ‘ owned’ by these groups and thus can be used at a time and place of their choosing. This means that these groups only have to intervene in the agenda setting when they have a personal interest in the matter.

Bachrach and Baratz’s idea of power builds on that of Dahl’s incorporating the visible power that can be seen by the public on the decisions being made, but also power that is not visible to the public. Bachrach and Baratz imply that there is a distinction between the formality of the decision making process, and an informality of the non-decision or agenda setting process. As discussed above, the decision making process is a relatively overt one. In

contrast, the agents in the agenda setting process are less identifiable, because the number of agents who have influence over the agenda setting process has increased. For example, if A has power over B and B has power over C and C is involved in the agenda setting process, then it is fair to say that C has been influenced by A and B. Therefore, this is important to political scientists because they need to be able to identify who has exercised power, in order to analyse who has had the biggest influence in the agenda setting. As well as identifying who has power, they would need to take in to account the relative amounts of power involved groups have. If, in the example above, A only has a small amount of influence over B but B has a large influence over C then the distribution of power is uneven. It may appear that B has had a significant influence over C, but actually it is A who has had the most influence. Situations like this one would be difficult for political scientists to analyse.

Although Bachrach and Baratz have made a significant advance on Dahl's one-dimensional view of power, the main criticism made against them is that they still have not acknowledged that power relationships may exist covertly. Their theory is based (in much the same way as Dahl's) on the assumption of visible power relationships. Both the first and second face of power fail to recognise that power may be exercised by manipulation and persuasion. The first and second faces of power both assume that individuals and groups act rationally, but Steven Lukes, in his theory of the third face of power or 'the radical view' of power, argues that this is impossible and against human nature. As Colin Hay explains:

In expanding the notion of power to include preference shaping, [Lukes] is forced to draw the distinction between subjective or perceived interests on the one hand, and actual or 'real' interests on the other, suggesting that where power is exercised it involves the subversion of the latter. (2002, p. 180).

Perceived interests are what we know to be our real interests, which are influenced or 'shaped' by the world around us, the people in our lives and the way we have been brought up, as well as the media. The crucial point here is that we believed our perceived interests to be our real interests, because we are not able to determine what our real interests are. Real interests are " what [people] would want and prefer were they able to make the choice" (Hay, 2002, p. 180). This is a rational idea because it is suggesting that people are living in a blinkered world, and are not fully aware of what their actual preferences and interests are. The difference between perceived and real interest is where power can be exercised. For example if A can get B to do x by persuading B that x is in B's perceived interests, where B does not know that doing x is actually against B's real interests then this an example of a power relationship. Both Hay and Haywood would say that B is exhibiting ' false consciousness'. Colin Hay argues against Lukes theory, saying that the condition of real interests is impossible as it relies on perfect knowledge which is impossible to acquire in the real world: " There is nothing objective about the process by which one ascertains one's genuine interests, since one's objective interests are one's perceived interests under the conditions of complete information." (Hay, 2002, p. 182). Lukes idea of complete information argues that people should

have full understanding of the world around them and what was best for them. This means that these people would not be influenced or persuaded because they will be able to make a distinction between real interests and the perceived interests that are thrust upon them. Put in the simplest terms, Lukes is suggesting that we don't know what is really best for us; we have a blinkered view of the world and our interests. This is an obvious criticism, as it is impossible to prove or quantify objective and real interests, and if there is any such difference between them. It is unrealistic to suggest that anyone can exist under conditions of perfect knowledge, because this would mean acquiring full knowledge of everything in the world. Also the idea that people are living under the term (which both Hay and Haywood frequently use) called 'false consciousness'. This is indeed a radical one, as it is suggesting that people are incapable of making rational judgements for themselves. People may take offense to this view as they may understand Lukes to mean that they are 'stupid' because they cannot determine their real interests.

To conclude, all three faces of power are significant and each bring something different to the debate surrounding power. However, the third face of power is the most important for political scientists to take into account because it is the most realistic, and is the most all-encompassing form of power. It is easy to think of an example of this form of power in our everyday lives. However, it is difficult for political scientists to measure and quantify what groups in society have power and power distribution. Due to the nature of the third face of power, it is likely that political scientists may disagree over such issues as real and perceived interests because political



scientists may have been ‘brought up’ on different political assumptions and points of view.

**Bibliography:**

Bachrach, B & Barats, M. S, (1994) Two faces of Power, American Political Science Review (Routledge)

Domhoff, G W, (2005) Who Rules America: Who really rules in Dahl’s New Haven? Full address: [http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/new\\_haven.html](http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/new_haven.html)

Hay, C (ed.) (2002) Political Analysis A Critical Introduction (Palgrave Macmillan)

Haywood, A (1994) Political Ideas And Concepts (Bedford)

Lukes, S (1974) Power: A radical View, Macmillan Press. [http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=zYuPgt4AjysC&oi=fnd&pg=PA296&dq=steven+lukes+power+a+radical+view&ots=rtYtry\\_yv1&sig=GYzVxQlnHFJOdcva4UOSEyoPhEM#PPA296, M1](http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=zYuPgt4AjysC&oi=fnd&pg=PA296&dq=steven+lukes+power+a+radical+view&ots=rtYtry_yv1&sig=GYzVxQlnHFJOdcva4UOSEyoPhEM#PPA296, M1)

Morriss, P, (1987), Power: A philosophical Analysis (Manchester University Press)